



Branches of Beliefs (old poplar, Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest) CHRIS HIGHLAND/SPECIAL TO ASHEVILLE CITIZEN TIMES

What name do we call God?



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

For six years I was an affordable housing manager with independent seniors, responsible for overseeing two large homes owned by a nonprofit, ecumenical agency. Ten women and men shared each house – a model of cooperative living. We found that people really can share a household peacefully, at least most of the time.

One of the residents, "Josephine," liked to chat with me during the shared dinners or on quiet afternoons in the house. Josephine considered herself very "spiritual," attending retreats and watching many YouTube videos of "spiritual masters." I enjoyed our conversations. When she heard that I was not a spiritual person, she was fine with that, continuing to tell me her stories and the lessons she was learning through meditation.

One of the hardest things I had to do as the manager was to ask people to leave. Some had to move out because they became uncooperative or disruptive in the household. Others had to move when they became unable to take care of themselves. "Independent living means independent," I would have to remind them.

Unfortunately the day came when I had to ask Josephine to leave. She was no longer able to make good decisions about her health, her driving and working with her housemates. Everyone, including me, liked Josephine; no one wanted her to leave. But it was up to me – my job – so I gave her a move-out date and did what I could to encourage her.

She wasn't happy with me and our good connection seemed to fade.

Months later I went to visit Josephine in a local rehab hospital. After she moved she was told she was developing dementia. She was glad to see me and suggested we walk outside to a sunny courtyard where we could talk. I told Josephine it was very hard to ask her to move, but she assured me it was "the best thing that could have happened." Josephine was still learning her "spiritual lessons" and seemed amazingly content. She showed no anger toward me. In fact, she treated me like a friend.

During our conversation in the courtyard, Josephine grew reflective and said, "I know you don't believe in God. That's OK. I call it God because I don't know what else to call it." I smiled at the wisdom of that.

When I was leaving, Josephine gave me a warm hug. She knew I was moving to North Carolina. She had one last gift for me. Glancing around at all the patients and staff, she said, "Only a few of us still have our minds in here." I chuckled at her honesty and hugged her again as another friend came to visit. It was good to walk out the door with a tear and a smile.

What do you call it? What do you call that something somewhere that seems to need a name? We don't know what else to call it, so we call it Spirit or Creator, Allah or Krishna, Buddha or Christ. Some call it Nature or Universe, Goddess or "simply" God.

The ancient Chinese scripture, Tao Te-Ching, begins with a verse that reads, "The Tao [Way] that can be told is not the eternal Tao; The name that can be named is not the eternal name. The Nameless is the origin of Heaven

and Earth; The Named is the mother of all things."

Both Taoist and Buddhist thought are skeptical of the way we name things. When you name something, you might think you control it. Some think this is one reason the biblical Hebrews would not say the name represented by the letters YHVH (sometimes pronounced Yahweh, but no one really knows). Jews say Adonai (Lord) in place of the holy Name (when you see LORD in caps in the Bible it's really the four letter YHVH). When Moses came face to face with the faceless on Mount Sinai the name YHVH was said to mean, "I Am." Hard to control Existence. How do you name it? We don't hear many people say, "I believe in Being."

That might just be a good bridge to connect the land of believing and the land of disbelieving. A secular person accepts Being/Existence. It's only when someone claims a name for Being/Existence that troubles arise. Once you give Being/Existence a name, then a Personality with thoughts and feelings, adding that you have a "special relationship" with Him/Her ... well, you see the problem.

I think I'll stick with Josephine and her early-dementia way of explaining what's going on here. Call it God if you don't know what else to call it. Others select different names. Universal Nature works for me. Then again, why name it at all?

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.